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Men With a Mission, at the Midterm

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A senior White House official, reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of President Reagan's Cabinet members, was asked recently who among them has come to the Oval Office during the past 18 months bearing bad news the president might not want to hear.

He paused, then answered, "Sen. Pete Domenici."

When asked which of the 16 Cabinet members would be most valuable in helping Republicans during this fall's congressional campaigns, one of Reagan's senior political advisers said, "I'm glad I'm not Ed Rollins," referring to the White House political director. "The Cabinet officers have each committed to two weeks of campaigning, and it's hard to figure out where you'd want to use them."

As the Reagan administration nears midterm, these frank, typical judgments from those close to the president of the limitations and deficiencies of the Reagan Cabinet reflect their feelings that, in the words of one administration official, this is a Cabinet "without superstars." The judgments from outsiders are much harsher.

Instead, it is a Cabinet that rates highest for loyalty. Now that Alexander M. Haig Jr. is gone as secretary of state, it contains few dissenters and no solo fliers.

Cabinet members are quick to point out that the president is the only elected member of the executive branch, other than the vice president, and that he comes with plenty of strong convictions. Rather than the corporate-style "Cabinet government" promised by Reagan during the 1980 presidential campaign, most important decisions are made among the small group of White House advisers.

That is fine with the Cabinet. For the most part its members are a collection of wealthy, middle-aged males, steeped in the ways of board rooms and corporate management, who live by the executive branch equivalent of Sam Rayburn's famous congressional adage: "To get along, go along."

THE REAGAN CABINET

PART 1

Jimmy Carter brought into his Cabinet men who had won elections and brought with them their own political bases: Edmund S. Muskie, Cecil D. Andrus, Neil Goldschmidt, Moon Landrieu, Brock Adams. But the Reagan Cabinet has a markedly lighter political weight. One of the most frequently heard criticisms is that the group lacks sufficient political sensitivity.

One Cabinet member who agrees was asked recently for an example of how the administration has been hurt because of this.

"How many examples do you want?" he said, ticking off such embarrassments of the first 18 months as the furor caused by the decision to give tax exemptions to some private schools that are racially discriminatory.

"It is a Cabinet of businessmen, not politicians," a top administration official said. This is precisely what Reagan had intended. "One of my basic requirements," he said during the 1980 campaign, "is I want people who don't want a job in government. I want people who will have to step down to take a position in government."

Like those of other Cabinets, Reagan's appointees have fallen to the temptation of

the perquisites of government service. Reagan ordered his Cabinet members the day after taking office "not to redecorate their offices." In the first few months, at least six Cabinet members did so anyway, some spending thousands of dollars to improve their private bathrooms and dining rooms.

Like any other Cabinet of any other president, it is one in which some members clearly outshine the others. There is general agreement both inside and outside the administration that the most skilled and effective members of the Reagan Cabinet are Treasury Secretary Donald T. Regan, Transportation Secretary Andrew L. (Drew) Lewis Jr.

At the other end of the table, there is nearly unanimous agreement, even from some of those closest and most loyal to the president, that Labor Secretary Raymond J. Donovan and Housing and Urban Development Secretary Samuel R. Pierce Jr. are conspicuous administration liabilities.

Between these two groups is a collection of Cabinet members who, nearly everyone agrees, have some obvious strong points and some serious flaws. It is widely anticipated that there will be a reshuffling of the Cabinet after the Nov. 2 elections.

In a series of interviews recently, many Cabinet members, White House aides, other administration officials, members of Congress, lobbyists and academics assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the individual members of the Reagan Cabinet.

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By the very nature of his position, less is known about how William J. Casey, director of the CIA, has fared. One senior White House insider said Casey serves Reagan well by delivering analyses without adding recommendations. Another official said it's difficult to determine how much independent ability Casey brings to the post because he often just reads from prepared papers.

His former deputy, Adm. Bobby R. Inman, was a favorite in Congress, but Casey is not trusted by some members of the Intelligence committees. "Even if Casey was telling the truth with his hand on a stack of Bibles, I wouldn't believe him," one committee Democrat said. "He'll tell you something and you really don't know."

EXCERPTED